DOCUMENT RESUME

PS 027 969

ED 433 960

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TITLE The Use of Magic/Mythic Stories and Their Relevance to Children's Development: The Case of the Father Christmas Story.

PUB DATE 1999-09-00

NOTE 38p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Conference (9th, Helsinki, Finland, September 1-4, 1999).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Development; Emotional Development; Foreign Countries; *Holidays; Longitudinal Studies; *Mythology; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship; *Parents; Religious Holidays; Values; *Young Children

IDENTIFIERS Christmas; England; *Santa Claus; Spiritual Development

ABSTRACT

The story of Father Christmas is widespread across Europe and beyond, and for almost six weeks each year dominates children's and adults' lives. This longitudinal study examined parental practices and attitudes towards the Father Christmas story. Participating during the first phase of the study, conducted during November and December 1998, were parents and guardians of children up to the age of 8 residing in the East Anglia region in the United Kingdom. Their practices and attitudes were identified through 318 mail questionnaires (53 percent response rate) and 10 interviews. A purposive sample was used to obtain views of parents from diverse backgrounds. Questionnaire data indicated that parents overwhelmingly reported that they celebrate Father Christmas, that they had been brought up to believe in Father Christmas, and that they encourage their children to believe in him. Most parents reported that they found out gradually that Father Christmas was not real and they did not recall strong feelings about it. The majority stated that Father Christmas was real for their children, especially 4- to 6-year-olds, and that they expected the children to find out that Father Christmas was imaginary between 7 and 10 years of age. Parents believed that Father Christmas had no real adverse effects on children, highly rated the magical experience and feelings of excitement and wonder associated with it, and acknowledged to a lesser degree values conveyed by the Father Christmas story. The majority of parents indicated that Father Christmas was celebrated in their children's schools/nurseries. (Contains 39 references.) (Author/KB)

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The use of magic/mythic stories and their relevance to children's development:
The case of the Father Christmas story

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September 1999

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ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted to investigate the magic/mythic story of Father Christmas which, in different forms, has widespread currency across Europe and beyond, and for almost six weeks each year dominates children's and adults' lives. This is a longitudinal study which aims to find out parental, professional and children's practices and attitudes towards the Father Christmas story.

During the first phase of the study, which was conducted during November and December 1998, parents' practices and attitudes were investigated. In particular the study addressed the question whether parents keep up, or not, with the Father Christmas story and why they are doing so. 318 questionnaires were distributed among parents of children under 8 years of age, living in Essex and Suffolk, and 10 interviews were conducted. For the analysis of the data, the SPSS programme was used for the questionnaires and content analysis for the interviews. The overwhelming finding of the study was that parents keep up with the Father Christmas story and they perceive the magic of the story and event as paramount over many other countervailing values. The mythic/magic thinking promoted through the Father Christmas story and its relevance and contribution to children's affective, spiritual and cognitive development will be explored and discussed in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Once a year and almost for six weeks, just before Christmas, Father Christmas dominates children's lives at least in the Western societies. American data suggests that out of a sample of 70 parents, 81% think that their young children believe in Father Christmas, and 64% of parents encourage this belief (Rosengren et al., 1994). Preliminary data from the Father Christmas Research Project support further these findings (Papatheodorou and Gill,1998). If such findings represent typical behaviour, it appears then that a substantial number of children are receiving powerful messages about the 'reality' of Father Christmas.

Children are exposed to many legends, stories and fairy tales which are told to them by adults who convey that special attitude of "suspended belief" that are not really real. In contrast, the Father Christmas story is told, like religious stories, as if it is true. The tooth fairy is perhaps the only other non-religious imaginary figure that is presented to children as real at least in the British culture (Rosengren et al., 1994). The tooth fairy and Father Christmas share the fact that their "reality" has tangible effects; money in return for the tooth, and presents, respectively. It seems, however, that the tooth fairy is not comparable with Father Christmas in terms of imagery, representation, public acknowledgement, nor complexity of story (Pretes,1995), nor is there a cultural industry surrounding the loss of milk teeth.

Commercial pressures, the spirit of giving and traditional conformity may be factors for perpetuating the Father Christmas story, but they do not seem to be sufficient to justify

the ubiquity of adult encouragement of this belief (Gill and Papatheodorou,1999). Zipes (1979) argues that the cultural industries may have grown in power and have considerable influence on individuals' consciousness, but they do not seem to have total control. Probably a study of the unspoken and, perhaps, unexamined or unconscious beliefs that adults hold about the perceived effects of the Father Christmas story on children may illuminate the justification of its perpetuation.

Finding out about Father Christmas's reality and children's cognitive abilities

Children's cognitive abilities may count for the presentation of Father Christmas as a real figure. According to Piagetian theory, young children can not distinguish reliably the properties of real and imaginary things. Nye (1996) argues that children's understanding of the relationship between fantasy and reality is far from stable. Stevenson, quoted in Dunsiberre (1987), argues that children do not have the basis of acquired knowledge from which to divide the phenomena of the world into real and unreal. Because of this, their capacity for belief is infinitely greater than adults.

Rosengren et al (1994) and Subbotsky (1994) suggest that even 4-5 year olds make a distinction between events which are possible in reality and those in stories although in some circumstances skeptical children behave as if they believe in magic. It seems that a "credulousness towards magic lies just below the surface" (Rosengren et al., 1994, p.81). But, Subbotskii (1985) argues that by about 7 years a clearer distinction between reality and fantasy is usual. This may be the culmination of gradually increasing suspicions, or a more abrupt discovery. Harris et al (1991) conclude that "children systematically

distinguish fantasy from reality, but are tempted to believe in the existence of what they have merely imagined" (p.120

Clark (1995) states that finding out about Father Christmas's reality constitutes an anticipated, inevitable event in children's development. As such it can be conceptualised as a "rite of passage" from the beliefs of early childhood to the skepticism of the older child who requires more evidence-based knowledge (Levi-Strauss, 1993). Whether finding out about Father Christmas marks an end of early childhood, or even a significant transition in development, coming as it does at variable ages and in differing ways, is debatable. If finding out is seen as a stage in children's development, it would then seem likely that parents would mark the transition with some form of recognition. This does not appear to be so. American data indicates that children, who have just learned that Father Christmas is not real, think that the story should be kept up for younger children (Benjamin et.al., 1979, Clark,1995). It could be possibly argued that maintaining the pretence gives children who share knowledge alongside adults, good feelings, or perhaps those children feel they have experienced something of value from the belief. Clark (1995) states that "a child can lose literal belief in Father Christmas (sic) but retain the visionary powers to believe in whatever still provides sanctuary and meaning" (p.58). However, it might also be argued that collusion with adults may represent a "rite of passage" itself, as it signifies children's transition to a more "mature" life stage (Clark,1995).

The Father Christmas story and children's affective and spiritual growth

Kirk (1974) states that stories which implant themselves strongly into society and become traditional possess both exceptional narrative power and clear functional relevance beyond entertainment. They may offer some explanation for some phenomenon or custom, or allow individuals to express an emotion in a way that satisfies them. Moyers (Campell and Moyers,1988) in his conversations with the anthropologist Campell wonders whether individuals tell stories to come to terms with the world and to harmonise their lives with reality. Campell (Campell and Moyers,1988) The Father Christmas story through the images and the associated patterns of behaviour which are blended with individual growth and changing circumstances may be seen as revealing new perception and meaning for the self and the world (Dunsiberre,1987). As such the Father Christmas story may present a challenge because within it lies 'the hope of self-transformation and better world' (Zipes,1979, p. ix) which may be passed on between generations in a subtle way. It could be argued then that when children move from belief in Father Christmas as a material reality, is it expected that the psychological reality of the symbolic meaning will remain (Bates, 1998). Additionally, Clark (1995) argues that the more Father Christmas is treated as a representation the more the underlying essence leaps forward.

It is also possible, to papraphrase Campell (Campell and Moyers,1988) that Father Christmas is perceived as a metaphorical figure whose story symbolises deeper spiritual meanings and what stands behind the visible world. Kimes Myers (1997) broadly defines spirituality as an exhaustible web of meaning interrelatedly connecting the self with the

world. While Seden (1998), commenting on Crompton's definition of spirituality, acknowledges four elements which all are present in the Father Christmas story. These are a sense of mystery, wonder and awe, a sense of values and ideas about goodness, a sense of meaning and insight, and a sense of a changed quality in awareness. Nye (1996) tentatively offers an alternative definition of spirituality as 'attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests'. Despite the obvious commercialism of Father Christmas there may be an associated sense of magic, "a signal of transcendence" (Berger, 1970; Clark,1995) that accords Father Christmas such a special place in many children's early years. The gift-giving of Father Christmas to children celebrates unearned abundance which is different from the conditional (be good, save up, when we can afford it) receiving of commodities children usually experience. It could be then argued that Father Christmas represents the spirit of Christmas to children, which many parents seek to keep alive, and which represents different values and the potential for different forms of relationships. Wolf (1964) argues that Father Christmas is a kindly old man who has left the competitive economic reality and can embrace an alternative set of values; benevolent, happy, co-operative, generous and moral and it is this magic economy that parents introduce to their children. Perhaps it is here that the justification for keeping up the Father Christmas story is revealed.

The Father Christmas story and children's mythic and rational thought

For a long time mythic and rational thought have been dichotomised with the latter being considered as superior (Kirk,1974; Clark,1995). Mythic and rational thought differ in that the first involves thinking in images and similes and depends on the visual and figurative

elements of stories while the latter involves critical thinking and search for evidence (Kirk,1974). Cognitively oriented psychologist have often treated mythic thinking as a primitive function that distorts reality and puts the fantasiser out of touch with reality (Clark,1995). Egan (1988), however, argues that 'mythic' thinking, learned through fantasy, is parallel and equally important to rational thought processes and Albert Einstein, cited in Knight (1961), states that the mysterious is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and science.

Kirk (1974), quoting the German philosopher Snell, states that although mythical and rational thinking are not co-extensive, however, they do not exclude each other completely. He argues that there is room in mythical thinking, for much that is rational and visa versa. Actually, there is much overlap between the two, in the sense that both kinds of thinking attempt to offer explanations for various phenomena and customs. Indeed, Popper (1994) states that story telling contains the first component for offering explanations of phenomena. The second component is rationality and critical discussion introduced initially by the writings of the Greek philosopher Thales and his pupil Anaximander, and later by Aristotle. Popper (1994) claims that critical discussion has arisen from the process of examining existing stories to produce a new improved and imaginative story which in turn was submitted to critical discussion. This process of thinking, according to Popper was the beginning of rational and logical thought; mythic thinking seems to have stimulated and given way to logical thinking. Although mythic thinking is often related to pre-logical thinking, the critical discussion of myths appears to

signify a transition between the two, although the process may be slow and gradual and sometimes may not be competed at all (Kirk,1974).

Rosengren and his colleagues (1994) suggest that developmental psychologists should place more emphasis on how 'magical beliefs' might influence children's causal reasoning. Nye (1996) taking the argument a step further points out that psychology for a long time has focused "on one domain (the cognitive) at the expense of our understanding of the whole child" (p.117). She points out that there is a need to develop children's awareness of the 'invisible reality'. Coe (1984) argues that the experience of childhood is 'magical'. "The child sees differently, reasons differently, reacts differently...The experience of childhood is something vastly, qualitatively different from adult experience... (pp.1-2).

Setting the scene for research

Father Christmas has survived hundreds of years, with some variations in his story, and it seems likely that he is here to remain whatever will be the future of his story in today's technological societies (Perrot,1994). Possible adverse effects on children from being deceived may be offset against the development of children's imaginative potential. As Coe (1984) would argue "Childhood constitutes an alternative dimension which cannot be conveyed by the utilitarian logic of the responsible adult. Not 'accuracy' but 'truth'-an inner symbolic truth- becomes the only criterion" (pp1-2). In this context, one might argue that the perpetuation of the Father Christmas story might be justified if emphasis

will be placed upon discovering this 'inner symbolic truth' and, as Nye (1996) would claim developing children's awareness of the 'invisible reality'.

THE AIMS OF THE STUDY

The findings discussed in the present paper are part of a larger study which was conducted to investigate parental practices and attitudes towards the Father Christmas story. In particular, this paper will address parental experiences of their own and their children's childhoods, and their attitudes with regard to:

- The Father Christmas story and children's cognitive abilities;
- The Father Christmas story and children's mythical/imaginal experiences; The Father Christmas story and values conveyed to children.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted among parents and guardians/carers of young children up to the age of 8, in 1998 and during a period of four weeks, from mid-November to mid-December, in East Anglia in the UK. A survey was conducted by employing "intra-method triangulation" (Sarantakos, 1998); two different techniques, that is a postal questionnaire and an interview, of the same method of collecting data, namely survey, were developed for the study.

The study sample

The study sample was derived from the region of East Anglia by using random, multi-stage sampling and purposive sampling

1. Random, multi-stage sampling

To select the study sample, the multi-stage sampling was adopted, and two areas within the region of East Anglia were selected, that is Essex and Suffolk, where parents of young children would be contacted (Hannagan,1982). Considering the difficulties which exist with regard to the response rate of postal questionnaires (Borg and Gall,1989), a decision was made that parents and carers of young children should be contacted via the schools/nurseries which their children attended. Parents whose children attend state and private schools/nurseries were conducted in both urban and rural areas. In total 290 questionnaires were distributed via schools (table 1). It was also decided 10 interviews to be conducted with individuals from the above sample who completed the questionnaire and were willing to be interviewed.

2. Purposive sampling

As East Anglia represents a predominantly English and monocultural society, it was also decided to have a purposive sample in order to have the views of parents from diverse backgrounds. The purposive sample consists of subjects whose views and opinions are thought to be relevant to the topic under investigation (Sarantakos,1998). The purposive sample was drawn from religious, cultural and ethnic minority groups, people under difficult and stressful circumstances via the child protection agency and individuals with

commercial connotations. In total 28 questionnaires were distributed to individuals consisted the purposive sample (table 1).

The network of associates

In order to identify, verify and further refine certain aspects and issues related to Father Christmas story, a network of associates was also established and consisted of:

- the director of Ipswich and Suffolk Council for racial equality;
- the director of Ipswich Child protection agency;
- a representative of the Interfaith Association in Ipswich (SIFRA);
- an internal academic from Suffolk College with interest in psychology;
- an external academic from the "Origins of Christmas project" and an interest in psychology;
- a representative of commerce, the designer of the Lapland Santapark in Finland.

Instruments

1. The questionnaire

A questionnaire with both closed, open-ended and contingency questions was developed for the purpose of the present study (Robson,1993; Sarantakos,1998). The questionnaire sought to collect both factual and attitudinal intergenerational information. In particular the questionnaire asked parents to state their own experiences as children and their perceptions of their young children's experiences. The final part of the questionnaire consisted of a number of attitudinal questions around a number of issues regarding the Father Christmas story.

Constructing the first draft

The first draft of the questionnaire was constructed considering

- Researchers own experiences and attitudes
- Initial casual and informal discussions with colleagues and friends;
- Initial informal discussions with members of the researchers network of associates;
- Journalistic literature (Bates, 1994; Driscoll,1994; Lowndes,1996);
- Findings of academic literature (Benjiamin et al,1979; Golby,1981; Alibhai,1987; Belk,1993; Clark,1995) ;

The draft questionnaire consisted of both closed and open-ended questions, but mainly of filter questions which aimed to elicit, for the first time in the study, information related to the general aspects of the topic under investigation (Sarantakos,1998). This initial draft was subject to both "self-critique" and "external scrutiny" (Sarantakos,1998). The researchers examined the draft questionnaire for the clarity of the questions included, and made changes in its overall content in the light of information derived from further search in the literature. The draft questionnaire was also piloted among six colleagues from the Early Childhood Studies degree programme. Comments and suggestions received were taken into account to develop the pilot questionnaire.

The pilot study

The pilot questionnaire was an improved version of the draft questionnaire which included both closed and open-ended questions, but filter questions were the main focus.

50 questionnaires were distributed to parents of young children via the College's nursery and to mature students with young children attending the Early Childhood Studies programme during October 1998. 35 questionnaires were returned completed.

The questionnaire was also sent to each member of our network of associates for their comments and suggestions. On the basis of the responses received, two main changes were adopted. Firstly, a number of open-ended questions were converted to closed questions. A range of options derived from the content analysis of the pilot questionnaire was offered, while at the same time, respondents were given the opportunity to make any additional comments. Secondly, an additional section was added to the questionnaire to consider the attitudes and practices of individuals who do not celebrate Father Christmas.

The final questionnaire consisted of five parts. Parts one to four included a number of closed, open-ended and "contingency" questions. Contingency questions aim to elicit additional and more specific information on the issues being already addressed (Sarantakos,1998). In particular, part one referred to demographic/personal information about the respondents; part two was devised to be completed by individuals who do not celebrate Father Christmas; parts three and four asked for intergenerational factual and attitudinal information from respondents who celebrate Father Christmas. Part five was an attitudinal questionnaire devised by using the Likert-scale (Likert,1967). In this part respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree on a number of statements which referred to the following main themes:

- Father Christmas and its public aknowledgement;
- Father Christmas as a family tradition/issue;
- Father Christmas and Christianity;
- Father Christmas and commercialism (pressure on poor members of society, pressure on parents);
- Father Christmas's reality and children's developing cognitive abilities;
- Father Christmas and potential adverse effects on children (lying/deceiving children; children trust strangers; children become demanding);
- Father Christmas and its appropriateness in diverse societies (upsetting children members of different religious and cultural groups) ;
- Father Christmas conveying values;
- Father Christmas and its potential effect on mythic/magic thinking;
- Father Christmas and adults' revival of childhood memories.

Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they were willing to be interviewed as well.

2. Interviews

Considering the limitations which a questionnaire imposes on respondents replies (Borg and Gall,1989, Sarantakos,1998) and as part of the intra-method triangulation (Sarantakos,1998), the researchers decided to conduct 20 interviews to complement the study data. A semi-structured interview was developed for the purpose of this study. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to stay focused on the aims of their study

and at the same time give respondents the opportunity to discuss and verify their views on the topic under investigation (Sarantakos,1998). The interview was designed around the main issues covered in the attitudinal part of the main questionnaire (part 5).

THE MAIN STUDY

A personal contact was made with a number of schools/nurseries within the selected areas of the East Anglia to seek their cooperation and involvement in distributing the questionnaire. The contact person who agreed to the involvement took the responsibility to distribute and collect back the questionnaires from the parents of children under 8 years via the children in the class.

A personal contact was also made with

- The leaders of a number of religious and cultural groups;
- The associate in the local Child Protection Agency;
- The route leader for the training of "Father Christmases- to- be" in Weston Super Mare.

A cover letter which explained the aims of the study was attached to each questionnaire. To reassure respondents for anonymity and confidentiality, both the cover letter and the questionnaire were placed into an envelope which could be used for its the return (Sarantakos,1998). In total 318 questionnaires were distributed from mid-November to mid-December. 169 questionnaires were returned completed, that is 53.1 per cent response rate. 24 individual interviews were offered.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The present paper refers to the data collected from the questionnaire. The SPSS statistical package was used to analyse quantitative data derived from the closed questions by using simple descriptive statistics (Norusis, 1988). Content analysis was used for qualitative data derived from the "open-ended" and "contingency" questions of the questionnaire (Sarantakos,1998).

DISCUSSION

Family practices and experiences regarding Father Christmas

Almost unanimously parents stated that they celebrate Father Christmas in their families (95.3 per cent) (table 2) and they themselves have been brought up to believe in Father Christmas (98.1) (table 3). Recalling their experiences as children, 49.7 per cent of the parents stated that they found the truth about Father Christmas gradually (table 4). One parent said characteristically that "I was too logical and I worked it out for myself". However, children's immediate social environment appears also to have played a role in finding out. Both parents and friends (25.5 per cent and 11.8 per cent, respectively) were those who seemed to have given the game away (table 4).

Regarding the reactions which parents had as children, when they found out about Father Christmas, 72.6 per cent of them stated that either they can not remember their reactions or they did not bother at all, or they indicated that finding out it was just a confirmation of suspicions. 19.8 per cent of the parents said that they can recall themselves as being

disappointed, disillusioned and overwhelmed with disbelief, 5.6 per cent of them said that they have been upset (table 5). The fact that parents largely can not recall traumatic experience may have reinforced them to perpetuate the story. Indeed, 93,8 per cent of them said that they do keep up the story (table 3). This percentage, however, is slightly lower than the percentage that indicated the extent to which parents, themselves, were been brought to believe in Father Christmas (98.1 per cent). Some parents being disappointed, upset, disillusioned and feeling disbelief as children may have opted not to keep the story up.

Young children and Father Christmas's reality

The majority of parents (92.5 per cent) think that Father Christmas is real for their children (table 6). 77.6 per cent of the parents indicated that Father Christmas is real for their children aged 4-6 years (table 7), and they expect them to find out, sometime, at the ages of seven, eight, nine and even ten plus years, but the age of eight years seems to be the most popular anticipated age for finding out (39.7 per cent) (table 8). Such findings support further research which indicates that children at the age of seven start to distinguish fantasy from reality, although the process seems to be gradual, lasting for sometime, and children may go through a state of ambiguity tending to believe what they have merely imagined (Sabbotskii, 1985; Harris et al, 991). Parents may not be aware of the psychological research findings, but their experiential knowledge of children seems confirmatory, especially in their expectation for children to find out at the ages of 7-9 years. It appears then that children's age and their cognitive abilities at this age are factor which contribute to the perpetuation of the Father Christmas story.

There is a slight tendency for parents to agree that Father Christmas is a fantasy figure, but the statement that Father Christmas is not real is most problematic (table 9). The findings show that parents tend not to have an opinion for this statement, yet there is much discrepancy in their answers (M:2.82, Std dev: 1.31, variance: 1.722). Indeed, one parent had three long ticks on disagree, while another one wrote "Are you sure?" next to the statement and a third one ticked agree but underlined the word real with three lines. It seems possible that some parents perceive Father Christmas in a metaphorical sense and see him as a figure which represents some kind of meaning and values for the world as happens with stories which are well rooted in society (Kirk,1974)

Such a view may be seen as being further supported by the fact that parents tend to disagree with the statements both that making Father Christmas seem real to children is wrong ,and that Father Christmas should not be celebrated in schools. Actually, they tend to agree with the statement that it is ok for adults to pretend that Father Christmas is real (table 9). However, whilst there is a large measure of agreement, attitude scales do not reveal specific reasons respondents have for holding these ideas. Other questions reveal some possible explanation. Arguably, finding out could be seen as a potential contra-indicator to maintaining its pretence. However, parental attitudes may also indicate that "finding out" is a "rite of passage" in young children's lives. 55.3 per cent of the parents said that they expect their children to find out the truth about Father Christmas gradually as they did themselves, while friends (41.6 per cent) and the school (23.0 per cent) seem to contribute to such finding (table 4). Children are expected to receive clues and

information from their microsystem, either directly or indirectly, to work out the truth, with parental role in the finding out process being anticipated as less than the parents themselves experienced. Such a finding tends to lead to a hypothesis that belief in Father Christmas is hardly harmful to young children, and both parents and siblings, as in other studies (Benjiamin et al, 1979; Clark,1995), collude to keep the story up; they are the least expected informants to young children (table 4).

The view that parents may not see any adverse effects on children from their belief in Father Christmas seems to be further supported by consistent parental disagreement with the following statements. Parents tend to disagree that Father Christmas undermines children's trust in adults, encourages them to trust strangers; undermines their intelligence; and that children see Father Christmas as God (table 10). These findings may imply that either adults carefully present the Father Christmas story to children, or that children's gradually developing cognitive abilities allow them to discriminate and judge situations and circumstances. Some parents made careful reference to the issue of trusting strangers in the accounts they gave about the Father Christmas story in their family, others explained the glee they felt when out witting their parents to find out about Father Christmas. Whilst the adults in the study disagree that children see Father Christmas as God, American research shows that children do equate Santa Claus (Father Christmas with God (Clark,1995), which causes misgivings in some parents. None of our respondents offered testimony as to how they dealt with children's perceptions of the link between Father Christmas and God, possibly because they do not think any confusion exist.

However, parental views are not so clear about statements which indicate that Father Christmas can be a let down for children and upsets children from different faiths (table 10). This finding may have further implications for professionals who work with young children, especially when 62. 7 per cent of parents said that Father Christmas visits their children's school/nursery and another 32.0 per cent stated that they do not really know (table 11). Information and messages delivered about (and from) Father Christmas need to consider the nature of today's developing multicultural and diverse societies.

What do children get out from believing in Father Christmas

The majority of parents indicated excitement (90.7 per cent) and a magical experience (80.1 per cent) as the two elements that children mostly get out of belief in Father Christmas. A sense of fantasy, wonder and mystery were also highly rated (47, 8 per cent, 47.8 per cent, 40.4 per cent, respectively) (table 12). These findings were further supported by the fact that parents consistently agree with the statements that Father Christmas helps children keep a sense of wonder, helps them use their imagination, and he is a magical figure (table 13). Parents also tend to agree although to a lesser degree that Father Christmas is a fantasy figure, helps children believe in magic, generates enthusiasm and brings feelings of awe (table 13). Again, these findings have implications for professionals who work with young children. The magical experience, and experiences and feelings of wonder and excitement which have been so much valued by parents as lay persons need to be seriously considered by professionals in their everyday work with children. They need to give them opportunities and rich environments where

children will use their imagination and think in images and similes to promote reasoning and rational thinking. As Popper (1994) and Kirk (1974) argue mythic thinking is the first step to logical thinking, and as Einstein, so characteristically has pointed out, the mysterious is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and sciences. Such views become of importance within recent developments for early childhood provision which is gradually becoming more widely available, but also has been formalised to an extent to forget that the experience of childhood is 'magical'. A childhood should not be judged by the criteria of the utilitarian adults, because "The child sees differently, reasons differently, reacts differently...The experience of childhood is something vastly, qualitatively different from adult experience... (Coe,1984, pp.1-2).

Tradition which is discussed elsewhere (Papatheodorou and Gill,1999) was also highly rated (62.1 per cent) together with an incentive to be good (52.8 per cent). Although the latter statement may be seen as adults' conditional love (and reward) for their children, however, some parents very carefully stated that this applies "just before Christmas", or "two weeks before Christmas".

Parents also seem to think that belief in Father Christmas exposes children to such values as a sense of kindness and generosity (33.5 per cent and 24.2 per cent, respectively) (table 12). These parental views are further supported by their agreement that Father Christmas represents a spirit of generosity, human kindness and a caring world, and that Father Christmas renews hope every year (table 14). Although, parental attitudes about values embodied by Father Christmas are rated as next to magical experiences (lower mean,

bigger standard deviation and variance), still these remain an issue for careful consideration. In a subtle way, children are constantly subject to powerful messages via real and imaginary stories about the meaning of the world, self-transformation, and values and spirituality. Therefore, the Father Christmas story with its powerful presence in children's lives, may be used to convey messages about deeper, inner truths. Bates (1998) argues, when children move from belief in Father Christmas as a material reality, is it expected that the psychological reality of the symbolic meaning will remain. Again, such findings can be seen in terms of implications for professionals who can gradually present Father Christmas as a metaphorical figure and play the role of the mediator for young children to be introduced to the deeper spiritual meanings which the story may represent. As Clark (1995) argues the more Father Christmas is treated as a representation the more the underlying essence leaps forward.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the findings of the present study have shown that parents have overwhelmingly indicated that they celebrate Father Christmas in their families, that they have been brought to believe in Father Christmas and that they do bring their children up to believe in him. In general, parents reported that they found out gradually that Father Christmas is not real and they did not recall strong feelings about it. The majority of parents stated that Father Christmas is real for their children, specially those aged 4-6 years, and they expect them to find out sometime around the ages of seven, eight, nine and even ten years plus. Again, parents expect their children to find out about Father Christmas gradually and to work it out with a little bit of help of the immediate

environment of friends and the schools. Parents and older children tend to collude and keep the story up as long as possible for younger children.

Parents believe that Father Christmas is a fantasy figure with no real adverse effects on children, so they think that it ok for adults to pretend that Father Christmas is real. The magical experience and the feelings of excitement and wonder to which children are exposed via the Father Christmas story are highly rated by parents, while values conveyed by the same story have been also acknowledged although to a lesser degree. These findings seem to have relevance for professionals working with young children. This is especially true, because the majority of parents indicated that Father Christmas is celebrated in schools/nurseries.

Since Father Christmas is widely acknowledged in early years settings, it is recommended that professionals should develop curricula that:

- utilise in the best way the potential of the magical/mythical elements of the Father Christmas story, and the feelings of excitement and wonder to allow children to use their imagination;
- to emphasise the values which Father Christmas may represent and again use the elements and feelings of mystery, fantasy and wonder to provide meanings for the world and the self, and to introduce values and deeper, inner spirituality;

- to use the Father Christmas story in an inclusive way by seeking similarities and/or drawing parallels from different cultures and faiths. The future of mankind relies on mutual understanding and respect between people coming from different and diverse backgrounds.

Table 1. The study sample

Sampling / Locality & Region / School/nursery type	Random, multi-stage		Purposive		Total
	Essex	Suffolk	Suffolk	Other	
Urban/state schools		100			100
Rural/state schools	60				60
Urban/private schools & nursery	130				130
Child protection agency			15		15
Cultural/ethnic groups			10		10
Father Christmases-to-be				3	3
Total					318

RESULTS

Table 2: Families celebrating Father Christmas (N:169)

Families celebrating FC	F	%
Yes	161	95.3
No	8	4.7
Total	169	100.0

Table 3: Parents and children who have been brought up to believe in Father Christmas (N:161)

Brought up to believe in FC	Parents		Children	
	F	%	F	%
Yes	158	98.1	151	93.8
No	3	1.9	1	0.6
Not an issue	-	-	2	1.2
Not completed	-	-	7	4.4
Total	161	100.0	161	100.0

Table 4: How did parents find out and how do they expect their children to find out about Father Christmas(N:161)

Finding out	Parents			Children		
	F	%	R.O*	F	%	R.O*
Gradually	80	49.7	1	89	55.3	1
Parents	41	25.5	2	21	13.0	4
Friends	19	11.8	3	67	41.6	2
Don't remember	17	10.5	4	-	-	-
Siblings	15	9.3	5	21	13.0	4
School	15	9.3	5	37	23.0	3
TV	2	1.2	6	5	3.1	5
Other**	2	1.2	6	-	-	-

* Rank order

** caught parents in the act, found the presents.

Table 5: What kind of reaction did parents have as children (N:161)

Reaction	F	%
Can't remember	49	30.4
Not bothered	37	23.0
Confirmed suspicions	31	19.2
Disappointed	21	13.0
Upset	9	5.6
Disillusioned	6	3.7
Disbelief	5	3.1
Other	2	1.2
Deceived	1	0.6

Table 6: Is Father Christmas real for children? Parents perceptions(N:161)

Is FC real for children?	F	%
Yes	149	92.5
No	5	3.1
Don't know	7	4.4
Total	163	100.0

Table 7: Ages for which parents think that Father Christmas is real for their children (N:161)

Age group	F	%
0-3 years old	89	52.3
4-6 years old	125	77.6
7-9 years old	59	36.6
10+ years old	4	2.5

Table 8: At which age do parents expect their children to find out that Father Christmas is not real? (N:161)

Age	F	%
Up 5 years old	5	3.1
6 years old	15	9.3
7 years old	39	24.2
8 years old	64	39.7
9 years old	42	26.0
10+ years old	35	21.7

Table 9: Father Christmas and its reality (N:169)

Statements	Mean	Std Dev.	Variance
Father Christmas is not real;	2.82	1.31	1.722
Father Christmas is a fantasy figure;	3.77	.85	.720
Making Father Christmas seem real to children is wrong;	1.87	.83	.681
Father Christmas should not be celebrated in schools;	2.00	.87	.761
It is ok for adults to pretend that father Christmas is real	4.09	.75	.555

Table 10: Father Christmas and adverse effects (N:169)

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Father Christmas undermines children's trust in adults;	2.09	.84	.713
Father Christmas encourages children to trust strangers;	2.12	.91	.832
Father Christmas can be a let down for children;	2.53	1.01	1.019
Father Christmas upsets children from different faiths;	2.61	.95	.902
Father Christmas undermines children's intelligence;	1.90	.66	.473
Children see Father Christmas as God;	2.05	.82	.678

Table 11: Father Christmas's visit to schools (N:169)

FC visits schools	F	%
Yes	106	62.7
No	9	5.3
Don't know	54	32.0
Total	169	100.0

Table 12: What do children get out from believing in Father Christmas: parents' perceptions (N:161)

Children get	F	%
Excitement	146	90.7
Magical experience	129	80.1
A sense of tradition	100	62.1
Incentive to be good*	85	52.8
A sense of fantasy	77	47.8
A sense of wonder	77	47.8
A sense of mystery	65	40.4
A sense of kindness	54	33.5
Make believe experience	45	28.0
A sense of generosity	39	24.2
A sense of security	18	11.2
Other	2	1.2

* just before Christmas

Table 13: Father Christmas as a magic figure (N:169)

Statements	Mean	Std Dev.	Variance
Father Christmas helps children keep a sense of wonder;	4.18	.51	.258
Father Christmas is a magical figure;	4.16	.66	.438
Father Christmas helps children use their imagination;	4.15	.52	.274
Father Christmas helps children believe in magic;	3.79	.88	.774
Father Christmas is a fantasy figure;	3.77	.85	.720
Father Christmas generates enthusiasm;	3.77	.73	.532
Father Christmas brings feelings of awe;	3.56	.83	.689

Table 14: Father Christmas conveying values (N:169)

Statements	Mean	Std Dev.	Variance
Father Christmas represents a spirit of generosity;	3.84	.80	.637
Father Christmas represents human kindness;	3.73	.81	.652
Father Christmas represents a caring world;	3.59	.83	.683
Father Christmas renews hope every year;	3.64	.82	.669

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